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CIA policy isn't clear

Without criticism and reliable and intelligent reporting, the government cannot govern. —Walter Lippmann

In February, the Central Intelligence Agency issued a statement its director, George Bush, says was meant to clarify the CIA's stand on employment of journalists by the agency.

Recent developments have shown that the statement was not clear enough. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities has reported that perhaps as many as 50 journalists continue to be employed by the CIA in some capacity. And the Soviets were having a field day Tuesday accusing three Moscow-based correspondents of working for the CIA in addition to their journalistic duties.

The National News Council, an independent, voluntary body whose object is to serve the public interest in preserving the freedom of communication and advancing fair and accurate reporting, has asked Bush for a meeting to further clarify the agency's position on journalists.

The council was right to do so. Whether the meeting will come off is unknown, but apparently Bush himself is not interested in meeting with the council. His response to a letter from council chairman Stanley H. Fuld was that the CIA will stand on its February statement but that if the council wants, Bush would arrange for a meeting with "someone in the CIA who could discuss this in greater detail."

The February statement is a bit nebulous. It said that the CIA "will not enter into any paid or contractual relationship with any full-time or part-time news correspondent accredited by any U.S. news service, newspaper, periodical, radio or television network or station." It also says that the agency will, "as soon as feasible," put "existing relationships with individuals in these groups into conformity with this new policy."

Looked at closely, that doesn't mean a whole lot. It may mean the CIA won't sign any contracts or pay any journalists. It pointedly does not mean the CIA will cease to employ or make use of journalists, whether in a *quid pro quo* relationship or some other kind of arrangement.

The point is that until and unless the CIA makes it absolutely clear that it has no cozy arrangement with journalists which meets the letter of its policy statement but violates its spirit, the credibility of both the press and the CIA must suffer.

As the late Walter Lippmann so succinctly put it, the government cannot govern without reliable reporting. The public will mistrust the press if it believes the press is the creature of the government or its agencies, such as the CIA. A source-reporter arrangement is one thing. But when a journalist becomes an employee — by whatever subterfuge — of the government he ceases to be a journalist and becomes part of the government.

We believe George Bush should, in plain, straightforward language, make clear the CIA's policy on "hiring" journalists. He should do it soon.